



## Need last-minute gifts? Presidential hopefuls offer ornaments, gift wrap — and Trump mug shot merch

Former President Donald Trump speaks during a caucus rally, Tuesday, Dec. 19, 2023, in Waterloo, Iowa.

Associated Press

By MEG KINNARD  
Associated Press

**COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP)** — The field of 2024 presidential candidates may have some options for shoppers scrambling for a last-minute holiday gift. As the campaign for the White House kicks into full gear, the contenders are offering an onslaught of holiday-themed merchandise, many of which capture some of the surreal aspects of the

2024 race. Donald Trump, for instance, is embracing his status as the first former president to face criminal charges by emblazoning his mug shot on Christmas sweaters, gift wrap and stockings.

Trump and his supporters have embraced the image of him intensely glaring into a Fulton County Jail camera since he surrendered on charges that he illegally tried to interfere in Georgia's 2020 election.

Trump's campaign is hardly backing away from his status, offering items emblazoned with the mug shot almost immediately after it was taken in August, with nearly daily emails offering supporters a mug, T-shirt or poster bearing the image, along with the words "Never Surrender."

Nearly all of the 2024 candidates have online stores and most have tchotchkes that riff on the year's

politics.

You can snag a Nikki Haley tree ornament and wrapping paper emblazoned with the hopeful's campaign logo, or a litany of more traditional items like hats, shirts, and even "Past my prime?" drink koozies that harken back to the comment that led in part to Don Lemon being bounced from CNN.

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# Need last-minute gifts? Presidential hopefuls offer ornaments, gift wrap — and Trump mug shot merch

Continued from Front

Don't forget Ron DeSantis' set of golf balls whose box bares the phrase that he "has a pair" — a slight at Trump for not participating in the GOP primary debates. Or Vivek Ramaswamy's "Nikki = Corrupt" T-shirt, the phrase the entrepreneur wrote on a notepad after a debate night tirade against Haley's service on the board of aerospace giant Boeing Co.

Democrats are also taking advantage of the chance to pump up their sales — and the associated campaign donations that come with them. President Joe Biden's reelection campaign has a slew of the usual apparel fare. There's also its line of "Dark Brandon" shirts, signs, mugs and even holiday gift wrap with the president's red-eyed caricature that embraces the 2021-era "Let's Go Brandon" phrase intended as an insult (but which Democrats have aimed to operationalize in a tongue-in-cheek battle cry).

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s store has apparel, stickers and a number of items with "No shirt, no shoes, no Secret Service," recalling the independent candidate's ongoing denial of federal protection despite security issues during his campaign. You're out of luck, though, if you're looking for official Chris Christie or Dean Phillips merch — holiday or otherwise — although there are a number of third-party purveyors ready to hook you up with shirts, hats and even beach towels.

The Trump mug shot merch has been popping up along the campaign trail as Trump and others have been stumping across Iowa ahead of the Jan. 15 caucuses.

A Christmas version features a red and white Santa hat atop Trump's head. There's also a mug shot Christmas stocking and with wrapping paper to match, as well as another version with the candidate pumping his



Christmas gifts are seen on the stage during a former President Donald Trump commit to caucus rally, Tuesday, Dec. 19, 2023, in Waterloo, Iowa.

fist in the air.

At a recent Trump campaign event in Cedar Rapids, there was plenty of Trump merchandise in the crowd of at least 700, with the former president's name, "Make America Great Again" slogan and his mug shot blazoned on hats, T-shirts signs and more. One couple, who declined to speak to an Associated Press reporter, were wearing matching red and green MAGA Christmas sweaters.

Pat Sand, a 57-year-old from Marcus, Iowa, who was wearing a Trump campaign hat and button, said Trump's use of his mug shot on merchandise, including on Christmas-themed items, "puts the name and the face out there, good or bad."

Sand said he has novelty toilet paper that features Trump's mug shot on it — although he added, with a laugh, that he does not use it.

"My daughter got it for me," he said. "It was sarcasm." Outside the event, Scott Bohac from the Cleveland, Ohio, area was one of a handful of sellers of unofficial merchandise that set up tables and tents outside Trump's events.

As the crowd was stream-

ing home and a winter storm was starting to roll in, Bohac — who has spent the last three years traveling the country selling shirts outside Trump rallies — was folding the last few T-shirts he made for that day's event.

"Some of these vendors got like 20 different shirts. I push one shirt," said Bohac, who said he designs a new one for each event with the date and location of the rally — along with a word like "Trump" and some kind of image in the center, which he said is "usually always eagles."

Saying he has not started selling the designs featuring Trump's mug shot, Bohac said sales have gone up for him since Trump started facing criminal indictments, and that it's smart for the campaign to use it. "I just left that for everybody else," he said. "I do my thing."

Campaigns use their merchandising opportunities — from "Dark Brandon" to "Nikki = Corrupt" to the mug shot — to seize on the moment, said J. Mark Powell, a GOP strategist and long-time collector of political memorabilia in South Carolina.

"What we're seeing in this

cycle is making the most of things that are talked about at this very moment, but which will soon turn into trivia questions for political junkies," he said, adding that the fast fashion way

that campaigns utilize third-party vendors to make and sell their wares also brings in donations and user data, as well as visibility and generates pride among supporters.

"Giving someone a Biden coffee mug or a roll of Trump wrapping paper isn't going to change the mind of a single undecided or independent voter," said. "It just makes existing supporters feel good about their candidate."

In the future, Powell said that he imagines a campaign merchandising strategy that might reflect fewer novelty items and more ideology.

"Could liberals one day have the opportunity to buy an electric scooter to show their support for green energy, or conservatives purchase a barrier to be placed on a border wall?" he asked. "It sounds farfetched now, but who would have imagined Trump wrapping paper five years ago?"

Associated Press



## HAPPY HOLIDAYS

Season's Greetings! The Aruba Today Newspaper announces that due to the holidays, we will not be in circulation on Monday, December 25th, 2023 or Tuesday, December 26th, 2023. We will be back on newsstands everywhere bright and early to serve our readers and advertisers on Wednesday, December 27th, 2023.

From the team at the Aruba Today Newspaper and the entire staff at Caribbean Speed Printing (CSP), have a healthy, safe and Happy Holidays.



## Group pushes for change in how police use body camera footage in officer shooting probes

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST

Associated Press

**WASHINGTON (AP)** — An influential policing think tank is pushing law enforcement agencies to change how they handle body camera footage after police shootings, saying officers should not be able to review video before making their first statements to investigators. The Police Executive Research Forum changed its position in a report released Friday, nearly 10 years after the group was first tapped by the Justice Department to write guidelines for agencies adopting body cameras.

The technology has swept the country's police since. Now 79% of the country's local police work in departments that use them. They're in use in all cities of more than 1 million people, and Portland, Oregon, became the latest major city to adopt them in November.

"Having a body camera in your department is now expected," said Chuck Wexler, the group's executive director.

The technology has been key in cases like the death



A Los Angeles Police officer wears an on-body cameras during a demonstration for media in Los Angeles, Jan. 15, 2014.

of Tyre Nichols, where body camera footage showed how he was brutally beaten by Memphis, Tennessee, police who are now facing criminal charges.

Still, research on whether body cameras reduce police use of force overall have been mixed. Half of studies reviewed by the group showed officers with

cameras tend to use force less often, but the rest of the studies showed no difference.

Friday's report, an advance copy of which was provided exclusively to The Associated Press, also said departments should have clear policies on the release of video footage to the public. Of the 127 agencies

it reviewed, only 14% had specific policies for releasing body camera footage of critical incidents.

The adoption of body cameras by police departments around the country increased sharply during the national outpouring of protest after the 2014 death of Michael Brown at the hands of police in Fer-

guson, Missouri.

"There was a lot of faith put in body cameras as a silver bullet to some of the problems that many police departments have," said Jay Stanley, a senior policy analyst at the American Civil Liberties Union. "But a lot of that promise has not been fulfilled."

Allowing officers to view body-camera footage before speaking to investigators can allow their stories to change to fit the video, either through lying or subconscious distortion of how they recall the event.

"Policies like this one undercut the oversight function that the tool is supposed to play," Stanley said.

Agencies have already been moving away from allowing viewing footage ahead of time, and the new recommendation could hasten that process, Wexler said. The research forum is now recommending a hybrid approach where officers give an early interview before watching the video, then come back and give more information during investigations of shootings or other uses of force. □

Associated Press

## Military command ready to track Santa, and everyone can follow along

By SAGAR MEGHANI

Associated Press

**WASHINGTON (AP)** — As children around the world eagerly await Santa's arrival on Christmas, the military is ready to track him and see if he's using any new technology.

Armed with radars, sensors and aircraft, the North American Aerospace Defense Command in Colorado keeps a close watch on Santa and his sleigh from the moment he leaves the North Pole. And it once again will share all those details so everyone can follow along as Santa travels the globe beginning Christmas Eve.

NORAD, the military com-

mand that is responsible for protecting North American



This image provided by the Department of Defense shows volunteers answering phones and emails from children around the globe during the annual NORAD Tracks Santa event on Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, Colo., Dec. 24, 2022.

Associated Press

airspace, has launched its noradsanta.org website, social media sites and mobile app, loaded with games, movies, books and music. And there's a countdown clock showing when the official tracking of the sleigh will start.

The military will track Santa with, "the same technology we use every single day to keep North America safe," said U.S. Air Force Col. Elizabeth Mathias, NORAD's chief spokesperson. "We're able to follow the light from Rudolph's red nose."

Mathias says while NORAD has a good intelligence assessment of his sleigh's capabilities, Santa does not file a flight plan and may

have some high-tech secrets up his red sleeve this year to help guide his travels maybe even artificial intelligence.

"I don't know yet if he's using AI," said Mathias. "I'll be curious to see if our assessment of his flight this year shows us some advanced capabilities."

The tracking Santa tradition began in 1955, when Air Force Col. Harry Shoup the commander on duty at the NORAD's predecessor, the Continental Air Defense Command fielded a call from a child who dialed a misprinted telephone number in a newspaper department store ad, thinking she was calling Santa. □



## Pornhub owner agrees to pay \$1.8M and independent monitor to resolve sex trafficking-related charge

By PHILIP MARCELO

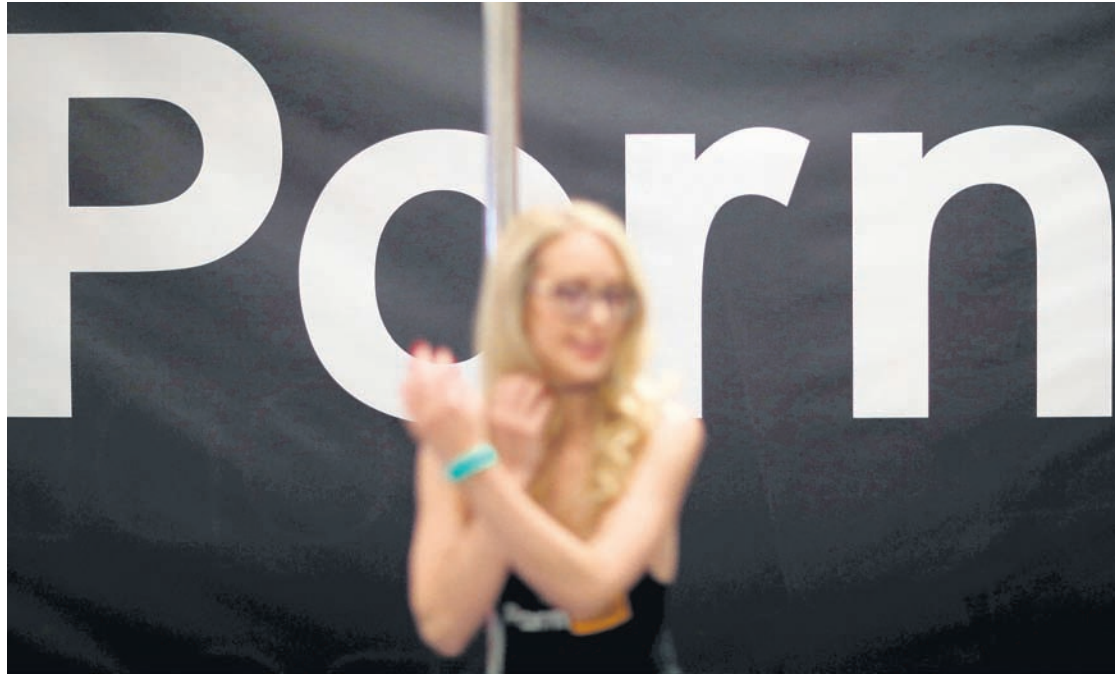
Associated Press

**NEW YORK (AP)** — The owner of Pornhub, one of the world's largest adult content websites, has admitted to profiting from sex trafficking and agreed to make payments to women whose videos were posted without their consent, federal prosecutors in New York announced Thursday. Aylo Holdings, the website's parent company, reached a deferred prosecution agreement to resolve a charge of engaging in unlawful monetary transactions involving sex trafficking proceeds, according to the office of Breon Peace, U.S.

Attorney for the Eastern District of New York.

The deal calls for the Montreal-based company to pay more than \$1.8 million to the U.S. government, as well as make separate payments to the individual women harmed by the trafficking.

It also requires appointment of an independent monitor for three years, af-



**Porn actress Ginger Banks stands in the Pornhub booth during the AVN Adult Entertainment Expo, Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2018, in Las Vegas.**

ter which the charges will be dismissed.

"It is our hope that this resolution, which includes certain agreed payments to the women whose images were posted on the company's platforms and an independent monitorship brings some measure of closure to those negatively affected," Peace said in

the statement.

James Smith, head of the FBI's New York office, said Aylo Holdings "knowingly enriched itself by turning a blind eye" to victims who told the company they had been deceived and coerced into the videos. Prosecutors said Aylo has agreed to pay victims compensation, but details

such as who is eligible and how they can apply will be forthcoming.

The charge stemmed from Aylo's role in hosting videos and accepting payments from GirlsDoPorn.

Operators of that now-defunct adult film production company were charged and eventually convicted of a range of sex trafficking

crimes, including coercing young women into engaging in sexual acts on camera that were then posted on Pornhub and other adult sites without their consent. Prosecutors say that between 2017 and 2020, Aylo received money that company officials knew or should have known was derived from GirlsDoPorn's sex trafficking operations. They also say the company didn't act swiftly or thoroughly enough to remove all the nonconsensual videos, even after a number of the women appealed directly to the company.

Aylo operates free and paid adult websites where content providers can post and distribute adult videos, with Aylo generating revenue through licensing agreements, advertisements and subscriptions.

According to prosecutors, the company received more than \$100,000 from GirlsDoPorn as well as roughly \$764,000 in payments from advertisers attributable to the production company. □

Associated Press

## Biden pardons thousands convicted of marijuana charges on federal lands and in Washington

By ZEKE MILLER

Associated Press

**WASHINGTON (AP)** — President Joe Biden pardoned thousands of people who were convicted of use and simple possession of marijuana on federal lands and in the District of Columbia, the White House said Friday, in his latest round of executive clemencies meant to rectify racial disparities in the justice system.

The categorical pardon builds on a similar round issued just before the 2022 midterm elections that pardoned thousands convicted of simple possession on federal lands eligible. Friday's action broadens the criminal offenses covered by the pardon. Biden

is also granting clemency to 11 people serving what the White House called "disproportionately long" sentences for nonviolent drug offenses.

Biden, in a statement, said his actions would help make the "promise of equal justice a reality."

"Criminal records for marijuana use and possession have imposed needless barriers to employment, housing, and educational opportunities," Biden said. "Too many lives have been upended because of our failed approach to marijuana.

It's time that we right these wrongs."

No one was freed from prison under last year's ac-

tion, but the pardons were meant to help thousands overcome obstacles to renting a home or finding a job. Similarly, no federal prisoners are eligible for release as a result of Friday's pardon. But the order expands the grounds on which pardons are issued. In the last round, people were pardoned for simple possession under only one criminal statute. Friday's pardons also apply to several other criminal statutes, including attempted simple possession.

Biden's order applies only to marijuana, which has been decriminalized or legalized in many states for some or all uses, but remains a controlled sub-

stance under federal law. U.S. regulators are studying reclassifying the drug from the category of drugs deemed to have "no cur-

rently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse," known as "Schedule I," to the less tightly regulated "Schedule III." □



**A demonstrator waves a flag with marijuana leaves depicted on it during a protest calling for the legalization of marijuana, outside of the White House on April 2, 2016, in Washington.**

Associated Press



## U.N. approves watered-down resolution on aid to Gaza without call for suspension of hostilities

By EDITH M. LEDERER

Associated Press

**UNITED NATIONS (AP)** — After many delays, the U.N. Security Council adopted a watered-down resolution Friday calling for immediately speeding up aid deliveries to desperate civilians in Gaza but without the original call for an “urgent suspension of hostilities” between Israel and Hamas.

The vote in the 15-member council was 13-0 with the United States and Russia abstaining. It followed a U.S. veto of a Russian amendment that would have restored the call for a suspension of hostilities. That vote was 10 members in favor, the U.S. against and four abstentions.

The revised text was negotiated during a week and a half of high-level diplomacy by the United States, the United Arab Emirates on behalf of Arab nations and others.

U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said late Thursday the United States, Israel’s closest ally, backed it. The U.S. abstention avoided a second U.S. veto of a Gaza resolution following Hamas’ surprise Oct. 7 attacks inside Israel. Council members met



People gather during the Security Council meeting at United Nations headquarters, Friday, Dec. 22, 2023.

behind closed doors on Thursday to discuss a revised draft resolution, then delayed the vote so they could consult their capitals on the significant changes, aimed at avoiding a U.S. veto. A new text with a few minor revisions was circulated Friday morning.

The circulation of the new draft culminated a week and a half of high-level negotiations involving U.S. Secretary of State Antony

Blinken. Between Tuesday and Thursday, Blinken spoke to the foreign ministers of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates three times each as well as to the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Britain, France and Germany.

The vote, initially scheduled for Monday, has been delayed every day since then. Rather than watered down, Thomas-Greenfield described the resolution

as “strong” and said it “is fully supported by the Arab group that provides them what they feel is needed to get humanitarian assistance on the ground.” But it was stripped of its key provision with teeth a call for “the urgent suspension of hostilities to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access, and for urgent steps towards a sustainable cessation of hostilities.” Instead, it calls

“for urgent steps to immediately allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access, and also for creating the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities.” The steps are not defined, but diplomats said if adopted this would mark the council’s first reference to stopping fighting.

On a key sticking point concerning aid deliveries, the new draft eliminates a previous request for the U.N. “to exclusively monitor all humanitarian relief consignments to Gaza provided through land, sea and air routes” by outside parties to confirm their humanitarian nature.

It substitutes a request to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to expeditiously appoint “a senior humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator with responsibility for facilitating, coordinating, monitoring and verifying” whether relief deliveries to Gaza that are not from the parties to the conflict are humanitarian goods. It asks the coordinator to expeditiously establish a “mechanism” to speed aid deliveries and demands that the parties to the conflict Israel and Hamas cooperate with the coordinator. □

Associated Press

## The Dutch government has taken another step toward donating 18 F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine

By MIKE CORDER

Associated Press

**THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP)** — The Dutch government announced Friday it is preparing to give 18 F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine, in a boost for the embattled nation that is growing increasingly anxious about aid from its Western allies. The Dutch defense minister, Kajsa Ollongren, sent a letter to parliament outlining the plan to donate the sophisticated jets that was first unveiled in the summer. Friday’s decision is a significant step toward sending the planes into the skies over Ukraine, but did not

say when they will be delivered. The government said



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, second right, and Dutch caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte, center, look at F-16 fighter jets in Eindhoven, Netherlands, on Aug. 20, 2023.

Associated Press

the move “allows personnel and budget to be allocated to prepare the devices” to be sent to Ukraine. “With F-16s, Ukraine can better defend itself against Russian attacks,” Ollongren said in a statement. She added that the planes are “extremely important because the ongoing Russian aggression shows no sign of ending. That is why we are continuing unabated with our support for Ukraine.” Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited a military airbase in the southern Dutch city of Eindhoven in August to inspect two of the jets on the day that the

Netherlands and Denmark said they would donate planes to boost the Ukrainian war effort.

Last month, Romania inaugurated an international training hub for F-16 jet pilots from allied countries and other partners, including Ukraine.

The training facility at an air base in southeast Romania will aim to increase interoperability between NATO allies, and better position the military alliance “to face the complex challenges” in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, Romania’s defense ministry said. □



## Mexico's president is willing to help with border migrant crush but wants US to open talks with Cuba

**MEXICO CITY (AP)** — Mexico's president said Friday that he is willing to help out with a surge of migrants that led to the closure of border crossings with the United States, but he wants the U.S. government to open talks with Cuba and send more development aid to migrants' home countries. The comments by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador came a day after the U.S. announced that a delegation of top U.S. officials would visit Mexico for talks on how to enforce immigration rules at the two countries' shared border. López Obrador confirmed that U.S. officials want Mexico to do more to block migrants at its southern border with Guatemala, or make it more difficult to move across Mexico by train or in trucks or buses, a policy known as "contention."

But the president said that in exchange he wanted the United States to send more development aid to migrants' home countries, and to reduce or eliminate sanctions against Cuba and Venezuela.

"We are going to help, as we always do," López Obrador said. "Mexico is helping reach agreements with



**Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador speaks at the National Palace in Mexico City, Jan. 10, 2023.**

other countries, in this case Venezuela."

"We also want something done about the (U.S.) differences with Cuba," López Obrador said. "We have already proposed to President (Joe) Biden that a U.S.-Cuba bilateral dialogue be opened."

"That is what we are going to discuss, it is not just contention," he said at his daily morning press briefing.

Mexico is apparently of-

fering to negotiate with Venezuela, whose people make up a large part of the surge of migrants at the U.S. southwestern border. That surge has led U.S. officials to pull immigration officers away from two Texas border rail crossings that are vital to Mexico's economy. López Obrador has long opposed U.S. sanctions on Cuba, whose migrants are also streaming to the U.S. border. And the Mexican

president has long pressed the United States to contribute to a tree-planting program and to youth scholarship and apprentice programs that he has been pushing for Central America.

López Obrador said the development aid will help stem residents' need to migrate. The Mexico-U.S. meetings come as Republican and Democratic lawmakers are debating

border policy changes as part of a larger conversation over U.S. assistance for Ukraine and Israel, which are top foreign policy priorities for the White House. Pressure mounted on Mexico following the closure of two railroad crossings in Texas earlier this week. U.S. officials said personnel assigned to the locations needed to be redeployed to help with large numbers of migrants illegally crossing the border. Mexican businesses warned the closures were hampering trade.

López Obrador spoke by telephone with Biden on Thursday and agreed that additional border enforcement was needed so the crossings can be reopened, White House national security spokesman John Kirby said.

Kirby said Biden asked Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and White House Homeland Security Advisor Liz Sherwood-Randall to travel to Mexico for talks with López Obrador and his team.

A U.S. official said the trip would likely happen the Wednesday after Christmas. □

**Associated Press**

## Russian official says U.S. is hampering a prisoner exchange with unequal demands

**MOSCOW (AP)** — A Russian deputy foreign minister said that talks with the United States on a potential prisoner exchange that would free Americans held in Russia are hampered by publicity and an alleged disparity in the U.S. negotiating stance.

The U.S. State Department said last week that Russia rejected several proposals for freeing Paul Whelan, an American convicted of espionage, and Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, who was detained in March and is facing espionage charges. "Here, as in many other areas, we observe the American traditional desire to get more for ourselves and give the minimum, as they say," Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said in an interview with the Interfax news agency that was published Friday. The United States has declared both Whelan and Gershkovich to be wrongly detained, and their cases have attracted substantial media attention.

"The American media, in general, at the instigation of the current administration, are actually engaged in savoring these stories," Ryabkov alleged. "This is a very difficult process, even when it is conducted confidentially behind closed doors."

"It is interesting that the participants in these contacts on the American side insist on their complete confidentiality. We also adhere to this line, but then certain turns occur when the White House regularly makes leaks and begins to discuss sensitive issues in the public space," he said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said last week that Moscow was discussing Whelan and Gershkovich with the U.S. and the Kremlin hoped to "find a solution." □



**Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich stands in a glass cage in a courtroom at the Moscow City Court, in Moscow, Russia, on Thursday, Dec. 14, 2023.**

**Associated Press**



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As the saying goes: "Behind every successful man, is a strong woman". In the case of Ponson, this was no different. As General Store progressed and slowly became successful, Mrs. Irene Ponson, came in to assist her husband. Irene Ponson is a visionary, she knew exactly where and how to invest and within a short amount of time in 1970, General Store moved to a better location at the Steenweg. This allowed for a lot more merchandise, products and employees. Supply and demand was as such, that General Store became the number 1 electrical business. Business kept going so well that the location at the Steenweg became too small and was moved later to Dakota Shopping Paradise and later to Pedro Gallego Straat. With this move, an expansion was decided upon and an electronics store in Savaneta was opened. General Store still being very successful was ready for more growth.

Ricky, Kenneth, Corine and Frans are the fruits of this marriage. Kenneth and Frans however, decided to further develop their father's legacy and continued with their mother's dream to expand the business. An expansion not in square feet only, but in merchandise as well. A great opportunity presented itself when the Ponson family was able to buy a piece of property across from the airport. In 2007 the Ponson family moved into their brand new and huge building. Ponson's General Store now had an electrical department, as housewares department, a paint department and a hardware department.

After a successful opening and expansion,



Kenneth and Frans who inherited their mother's vision, decided that General Store was ready for yet another expansion. With the support of Mr. Tom Barfell and management of Do it Best in the States, the construction of Do it Center commenced.

Fast forward to today. A Do it Center in Aruba, with more than 50.000 top of the line items for interior as well exterior use, building materials, STO products and a top of the line grocery store. Perseverance, responsibility, vision and the courage to invest have made Ponson's General Store as successful as it is today.

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Do It Center Groceries offers its weekly special on selected items. Weekly specials are very popular and a perfect chance for you to buy your favorite products at a reduced price.

Need a home makeover? Do not skip the furniture department "Leenbakker". Here, you will find a divine collection of European furniture, worldwide known for their modern and stylish features for your bedroom, bathroom, living room or kitchen. For your garden they have a wide selection of durable furniture specially made for our tropical climate. Take a walk around and find some treasures. Find the perfect accessory for your house, fitted for your personality and style. Modern, elegant, retro industrial, whatever your style is you will definitely find something for your personal taste.

Do it Center Shaba is open from Monday to Saturday from 8AM to 8PM and on Sunday's from 9AM to 6PM.

For more information go to [www.doit.aw](http://www.doit.aw) □





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**Aruba Tourism Authority honored loyal visitors at Marriott's Surf Club!**



The Aruba Tourism Authority recently had the great pleasure of recognizing Distinguished Visitors of Aruba. These honorees were respectively honored with a certificate acknowledging their years of visits, loyalty, and love for the island of Aruba.

The honor certification is presented on behalf of the Minister of Tourism as a token of appreciation and to say "Masha Danki" to guests who have visited Aruba 10, 20, or 35 years or more consecutively.

The three honoring levels are as follows:

- Distinguished Visitor (10>years consecutively visiting Aruba)
- Goodwill Ambassador (20>years consecutively visiting Aruba)
- Emerald Ambassador (35>years consecutively visiting Aruba)

The honorees were:

Distinguished Visitor of Aruba Mr. Joel & Mrs. Susan Resnick from New Jersey, United States.

Ms. Marouska Heyliger representing the Aruba Tourism Authority,

and staff members of the Marriott's Surf Club bestowed the certificate to the honorees, presented them with memorable gifts, and also thanked them for choosing Aruba as their best-loved vacation destination, as their home away from home.

Top reasons for returning to Aruba provided by the honorees were:

- Aruba's friendly people.
- "Aruba is peaceful."
- Aruba's beautiful beaches.
- "The lazy river at the Marriott's Surf Club."
- Aruba's friendly people.

On behalf of the Aruba Tourism Authority, we would like to express our sincere gratitude and appreciation to the honorees for their continued visits to the "One Happy Island". □

**Blackstone Beach**

(Oranjestad)—Named after its most recognizable feature, the Blackstone Beach almost represents the opposite of the typical Aruban beaches. For one, it has black sand and is covered in black smooth stones. Secondly, it lies on

the northern side of the island, away from the white sandy beaches of in the southern region. So, if you feel up for something different—or if it's opposite day, visit the Blackstone Beach.

Blackstone Beach shows

the more natural side of Aruba: the stones that cover the beaches and the shape of it has been crafted for thousand years via volcanic eruptions, coral reef movements and wave activity of the rural northern part of the island.

Located further east to the Natural Bridge and Andicuri Beach, the Blackstone Beach is relatively easy to access. Once you get passed the Ayo Rock Formation, take the Andicuri road leading up to Andicuri Beach. There, you can park your car and take a 1km hike towards Blackstone Beach.

This beach forms part of the Arikok National Park and is therefore a site that is pre-



served. This is why it is also relatively untouched by commercial influences. Despite being called a beach, do note that it is not advised to swim in the water, as the current is very strong and can easily stray you

further in the wild ocean. However, you can still enjoy a spectacular view of the stones and the northern ocean that stretches out in front of the beach and take a picture with your friends or family! □





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**Aruba's Nature is to be Cherished**

**ST. CRUZ — The national park Arikok comprises almost 18 % of the island. Its rugged terrain, desert-like hills filled with tall cacti, breathtaking coastline and protected local flora and fauna welcome you to be explored. There is numerous wildlife to discover like for example the sea turtle who lays his eggs on the park's beaches. There are more places on the island that are a preserved area like the Bubali Plas which is a bird sanctuary.**

The national park Arikok takes you on a memorable journey of the islands past offering unique geological, cultural and historical sites. These can all be enjoyed and explored either on your own or during guided tours. A wide variety of educational and informative programs and fun activities is available.

Did you know that four of the in total seven species of sea turtle lay their eggs on Aruba's beaches? In the national park, a Least Tern (*Sternula antillarum*) keeps a strict eye on a very special event taking place below on the beach: a majestic Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) heads back to sea after laying her eggs, while another

nest laid 2 months ago by the same female hatches. A very rare occurrence of daytime nesting and hatching. Sea turtles prefer nesting in the cool and dark hours of the night. And hatchlings usually wait for the cue of cooling surface sand before emerging.

**Bubali Magic**

This beautiful close-up image of the pink bird is courtesy of Michiel Oversteegen of the Aruba Birdlife Conservation. This important foundation showcases and builds awareness of Aruba's birds and other native flora and fauna. You may have seen a 'pink cloud' lately at the Bubali or Spanish Lagoon Wetlands areas? It's most likely to be Roseate Spoonbills (*Ajaia ajaja*) or 'Chucharon Cora' as they are known in Papiamentu. This unusual looking bird forages in shallow muddy water while sweeping its flattened bill from side to side to catch small fish, crustaceans and other aquatic invertebrates. The Roseate Spoonbill remains an uncommon sight as they are vulnerable to degradation of feeding and nesting habitats (Wetlands). (Source: arikok national park)

The aforementioned is just a part of what Aruba's nature has to offer. We cannot stress enough to go, see for yourself. The island has the most beautiful beaches but it is also worthwhile to go beyond this and get an idea of our entire island. Lately there is a discussion

going on about the effect certain activities have on our nature, for example the ATV vehicles cause a lot of dust, noise and leave tire tracks. Animals live in these areas where the vehicles

run, often with high speed and with detrimental consequences to flora and fauna. Motorized vehicles are forbidden to drive on the sand dunes in the Northern part of the island and all

beaches in Aruba are forbidden for any motorized vehicle. Treasure our island to enjoy it like you do: as a tropical and natural paradise. We truly appreciate it! ☐



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<b>WED Cultural Dance Show</b>	<b>THU Acrobatic Show</b>
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## Aruba to me

**ORANJESTAD — You are back and we would like to portrait you! By inviting you to send us your favorite vacation picture while enjoying our Happy Island.**

Complete the sentence: Aruba to me is ..... Send your picture with that text (including your name and where you are from) to: news@arubatoday.com and we will publish your vacation memory. Isn't that a special way to keep your best moments alive? Please do note: By submitting photos, text or any other

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Last but not least: check out our website, Instagram and Facebook page! Thank you for supporting our free newspaper, we strive to make you a happy reader every day again.

For today we received a lovely message from The Ellerins and Co-

hens from Lynnfield, Needham and Framingham, Massachusetts, USA.

They wrote to us saying: "Aruba to me is the warmth of another sun. The feeling of camaraderie with old friends and closeness of family being together once again."

Thank you for sending us this wonderful message sharing what Aruba means to you with us and our readers! □



## Episode LXXXIX - 89 Island inspiration

**ORANJESTAD — Nature has always been a source of creativity and inspiration for philosophers, artists and scientists. From early rock art to realism, impressionism, classicism or the avant-garde, everything that surrounds us in nature will never cease to amaze us. There is always something that inspires us with new ideas to create our work of art.**

Etnia Nativa creates ties with the resources of nature through its artistic productions and reflects on the future of the planet as the harmful impact of human beings on earth. Our works invite to think and raise awareness about the incidence of climate change, about the conservation and the necessary care of the environment. It seeks to reinforce local identity while preserving Aruba's



heritage and culture. Nature is our greatest resource and source of inspiration; most of our works are made of noble material and can return to the

earth without harming it. We work clay with ancient, pre-Columbian techniques, in the same way that other cultures worked their clay pieces in the past. Our works show connection and harmony with the natural cycle. The elaboration of each piece of clay has a creative itinerary that begins from the moment we go to harvest the clay, selecting the material for its plasticity and according to its color and texture. Afterwards, the clay must be crushed, let it soak for a few days, strain it and let it rest in a canvas bag to dry until it reaches the right consistency to knead, at that

moment some of our native creations come to life. The need to learn sustainable ways of co-habiting the earth is also the engine of our creations; communal works like "Breba pa unda?", a cactus with each of its four arms pointing to one of the four cardinal directions. A recycled garden hose represents the green however plastic nature taking over the island. Black, burnt Styrofoam for nature V.S. development, nature lost. The other two arms, the Aruba flag in blue and with the rusty red and yellow branch of native Aruba's indigenous heritage symbols.

Etnia Nativa is active in community consciousness inspiring art presentations. We are sharing awareness towards a healthy relationship with islands natural environment, it's surrounding ocean and once inner eco guru. We define art works not only through why it was created, or what influenced the artist to create but by analyzing what first comes to your mind. All materials that we apply are from rescue operations and transformed in our final works. An old Tibetan text says "Help nature and work with her and she will consider you one of her own and give you obedience."

To get to know more regarding Aruba's and its cultural origins & art we highly recommend Etnia Nativa's heritage experience session. A mind opening portal to an entertaining island experience is awaiting you. Mail us at [etnianativa03@gmail.com](mailto:etnianativa03@gmail.com) our facilities and activities take place close to high rise hotels. □



**Article by: Etnia Nativa**

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**Etnia Nativa is close to the high rise hotels**





## Visit the island's popular cave sites!



**(Oranjestad)—Among the endless sea of dark brown sand and cacti, there are two caves hidden in the outskirts of San Nicolas, in the north-eastern area of the island. These caves, The Quadirikiri cave and The Fonteijn Cave are open to visitors of the Arikok National Park, so if you ever decide to take an “off-road” tour in the park, be sure to visit these prehistoric caves...and be sure to bring a flashlight!**

### Quadirikiri Cave

Known for its two chambers accompanied by a skylight, the Quadirikiri Cave is the most popular cave among locals and tourists, as it is easy to walk through and provides great lighting for pictures.

As with all prehistoric or ancient sites, there is always a folk legend that adds to the lore and mystery of the site. The Quadirikiri cave is no different. The most well-known legend behind the cave could be considered as Aruba's first love story, as it tells the tale of the undying love between the chief's daughter and her beloved. As legend would have it, the chief disapproved of his daughter's choice of lover, as he thought him unworthy. Stubborn and filled with anger, the daughter refused to turn away her beloved.

So, the chief decided to lock her up in the Quadirikiri

Cave, in hopes that she would soon calm down and turn away her lover. Her beloved, in turn, was locked away in the Tunnel of Love (Now known as the Huliba Cave).

Through the pathways underneath the Tunnel of Love running up to the Quadirikiri cave, the two love birds found each other, and refused to let each other go. Because of their stubbornness, they both died in the Quadirikiri Cave, their ascending spirits burning two holes in the ceiling of the cave. This is why the cave has two holes through which sunlight passes through to illuminate the chamber.

Though there have been discoveries of Amerindian drawing on the wall, these have mostly been ruined by vandalism. However, the Fonteijn Cave further up north, provides a better glimpse in prehistoric Amerindian paintings.

### Fonteijn Cave

Longer than the Quadirikiri Cave, the Fonteijn Cave contains pathways that stretch to the limestone walls further down. Here is also where prehistoric drawings can be seen. Though this cave does not have its own legend, this was speculated to have been occupied—or at least used by prehistoric Arawak settlers on the island for rituals and other spiritual

ceremonies.

### The Huliba Cave/ Tunnel of Love

The Huliba Cave, formerly known as the Tunnel of Love, was once open to the public, and was the biggest and most accessible of all three caves. This cave had five chambers, including one that is heart-shaped. This cave had narrow stairs that led to long pathways deep into the cave, with a staircase leading to the exit on the other side. In one of the chambers, there used to be the carving of the Virgin Mary, put there for the protection of the cave.

However, the Huliba Cave has been permanently closed for a few years now, as a way to preserve the bat population that lives in the cave. These Long Tongue Fruit Bats and Insect Eater Bats are very important to the ecosystem of the island. Though this cave is no longer accessible to the public, it surely is interesting to learn more about the history of these caves and the Awarak tribes that resided or utilized them.

Do note that these caves are very dark, humid, hot, and are inhabited by bats. Do wear comfortable clothing and shoes, as the pathways in these caves may be rough and bumpy, and don't forget to bring a flashlight!☐

### Note to visitors:

Due to heavy rainfall in the past few days, Arikok National Park has informed that they have closed the Quadirikiri Cave until further notice for the safety of visitors.

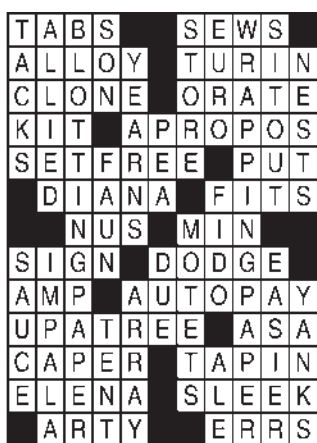
Fonteijn remains open from 9am to 4pm.





**CROSSWORD**

By THOMAS JOSEPH



**ACROSS** 42 Birch's kin

1 Snoozes 43 Uses a needle

5 Church leader 44 Blue hue

9 Della's boss

10 Isolated 1 Kind of network

12 — a limb 2 Blood line

13 Pine product 3 Debate group

14 Be an omen 4 Transmis-sion gap

16 Corp.'s superior 5 "Gay" city of song

17 Hole number 6 Bullring cry

18 Speculate 7 American marsupial

20 Milano of TV 8 Puzzle

22 General Bradley 9 Momma's mate

23 Score speed 11 Door sign

25 Bar mixer 15 Language topic

28 Riviera nation 19 Shortly

32 Washing machine cycle 21 RR stops

34 Gangland gun 24 Probed with a stick

35 Flock father 25 Small herring

36 Gift 26 Speaks

38 Be penitent 27 Reduce in rank

40 School event 29 Meeting slate

41 Wyoming's — Range 30 Make void

31 Mink's cousin

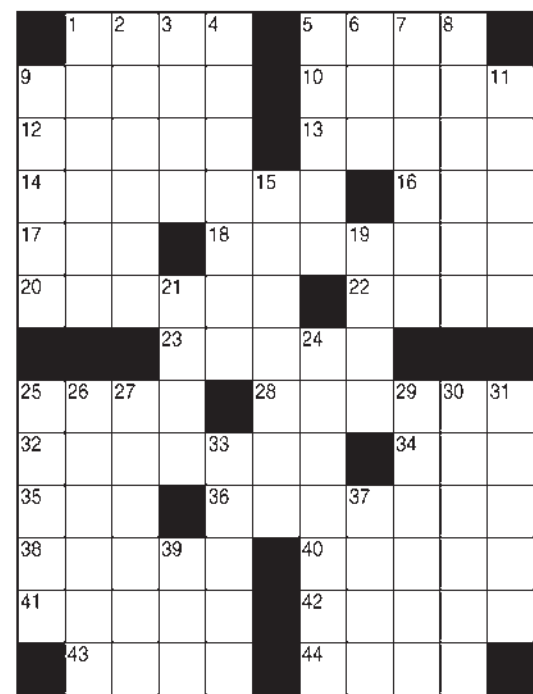
33 Some tourneys

37 Store event

39 At this moment

**DOWN**

**Yesterday's answer**



AXYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

12-23

**CRYPTOQUOTE**

U O I I Y T Z H X H A E H S Y Y

R A Y N Z T B S Y J H O A P C S C H

J Q M H J Y Z P C A M J S U O J H X H .

— T Z Q Z Y N Z

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: CHARITY IS NOT A BONE YOU THROW TO A DOG, BUT A BONE YOU SHARE WITH A DOG. — CHINESE PROVERB

**Here are some ways you can reduce financial stress during the holidays**



Holiday shopper crosses First Avenue in the Cherry Creek North shopping district late Friday, Dec. 15, 2023, in Denver.

Associated Press

By ADRIANA MORGA Associated Press

**NEW YORK (AP)** — The holidays are supposed to be a joyful time, but they can also be financially stressful. With gifts, social gatherings and plane tickets home, the costs can start piling up.

Household expenses continue to rise and many Americans are expressing concern about their financial futures, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

"Financial concerns are the number one anxiety-provoking issue (for the holidays)," said Dr. Petros Levounis, president of the American Psychiatric Association.

Here are recommendations from experts to reduce financial stress during the holidays:

**SET EXPECTATIONS**

In many families, the holidays mean going all out with gift giving. But this can quickly become stressful if your finances make it hard to keep up.

Managing expectations

is key, according to Sarah Foster, a Bankrate.com analyst.

"During the holiday season, we often feel like not talking about money, not letting individuals know how much the gift we bought for them cost," said Foster, who recommends leaving aside taboos and talking about how much you can afford to give this year.

**MAKE A BUDGET**

Setting a budget can help prevent stress during the holidays, Levounis said.

"Try not to spend beyond your means. Make a budget and stick with it. Being with friends is more meaningful for our mental health than the commercial aspects of this season," he said.

But not spending during the holiday season, when it seems like everyone is spending so much money on gifts, is easier said than done. If you struggle with overspending, Trae Bodge, a shopping expert, recommends that you set a spending limit for yourself.

Bodge recommends that you write a list of gifts you

and stick to it when you are out shopping. If you tend to spend a lot buying gifts for yourself, she recommends that you set a specific limit.

"If you say 'I only have \$50 or \$100, you're going to spend more mindfully,'" she said.

**GET CREATIVE**

There are several alternatives to spending a lot of money. They include:

Homemade gifts  
Lena Liu, 30, a Massachusetts-based fellow physician, has opted for giving homemade bracelets to some of her friends in the past.

"It can be really thoughtful and it actually ends up not being so expensive either," Liu said. "They know that you put your work and your energy into designing the bracelet and getting the beads so they really appreciate that."

**Gift cards**

Gift cards can seem impersonal, but Foster argues that they are a great way to stay within your budget since you can plan out the exact amount you're spending on each card.

**Experiences**

In recent years, Bodge has noticed that younger people prefer to gift each other experiences rather than gifts. But she recommended that you don't overspend on an expensive trip but rather find affordable fun activities to do with your loved ones.

Examples include going ice skating, hiking or hosting a potluck. You could also gift a photoshoot or framed pictures or digital albums to commemorate happy experiences.

"It's something that you and your loved ones can experience and enjoy together and take pictures and enjoy," Bodge said.

**The gift of time**

If you can't afford to take your parents on a trip or visit them during the holidays, giving them more of your time can be a true gift, Levounis said. □

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# Flu and COVID infections are rising and could get worse over the holidays, CDC says



A flu vaccine is readied at the L.A. Care and Blue Shield of California Promise Health Plans' Community Resource Center in Lynwood, Calif., on Friday, Oct. 28, 2022.

Associated Press

By MIKE STOBBE  
AP Medical Writer

**NEW YORK (AP)** — Look for flu and COVID-19 infections to ramp up in the coming weeks, U.S. health officials say, with increases fueled by holiday gatherings, too many unvaccinated people and a new version of the coronavirus that may be spreading more easily. High levels of flu-like illnesses were reported last week in 17 states up from 14 the week before, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Friday. "Folks are traveling a lot more this season. They want to see their families," said the CDC's Dr. Manisha Patel. "And all of that sort of adds to the mix" in the spread of viruses. Health officials are keeping

an eye on a version of the ever-evolving coronavirus, known as JN.1. The omicron variant was first detected in the U.S. in September and now accounts for an estimated 20% of cases. The CDC expects it to reach 50% in the next two weeks, Patel said. It may spread easier or be better at evading our immune systems, but there is no evidence that the strain causes more severe disease than other recent variants, health officials say. And current evidence indicates vaccines and antiviral medications work against it. As for flu, early signs suggest current vaccines are well-matched to the strain that is causing the most illnesses, and that strain usually

doesn't cause as many deaths and hospitalizations as some other versions. But the bad news is vaccinations are down this year, officials say. About 42% of U.S. adults had gotten flu shots by the first week of December, down from about 45% at the same time last year, according to the CDC. Americans have also been slow to get other vaccinations. Only about 18% have gotten an updated COVID-19 shot that became available in September. At nursing homes, about a third of residents are up to date with COVID-19 vaccines. And only 17% of adults 60 and older had received new shots against another respiratory virus. RSV, respiratory syncytial virus, is a common cause of mild coldlike symptoms but it can be dangerous for infants and older people.

The CDC last week took the unusual step of sending a health alert to U.S. doctors urging them to immunize their patients against the trio of viruses. The Carolinas are currently seeing the heaviest traffic for respiratory infections in emergency rooms, according to CDC data posted this week. □



### Marriott Aruba Surf Club PLATINUM SEASON

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- 2 Bed Oceanside \$23,000
- 2 Bed Ocean view \$21,500
- 2 Bed Garden view \$16,000
- 3 Bed Ocean view \$29,000
- WK 51 Ocean view \$60,000
- WK 52 Ocean View \$60,000
- WK 7 and 14 - all views

### GOLD SEASON

- 2 Bed Oceanfront \$18,000
- 2 Bed Oceanside \$14,000
- 2 Bed Ocean view \$12,500
- 2 Bed Garden view \$10,000
- 3 Bed Ocean view \$20,000

### Marriott Aruba Ocean Club PLATINUM SEASON

- 2 Bed Oceanfront \$36,000
- 2 Bed Ocean view \$24,000
- 1 Bed Ocean front \$16,500
- 1 Bed Ocean View \$14,500

### GOLD SEASON

- 2 Bed Oceanfront \$18,000
- 2 Bed Ocean view \$13,500
- 1 Bed oceanfront \$14,500
- 1 Bed ocean View \$13,500

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Aloe: Tel. 584 4606

Women in Difficulties

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## Wilder and Joshua jostle for position as heavyweight scene simmers before Fury-Usyk unification bout

By **STEVE DOUGLAS**  
AP Sports Writer

Deontay Wilder and Anthony Joshua were once the main characters in heavyweight boxing's soap opera.

Now they are extras.

While Tyson Fury and Oleksandr Usyk continue preparations for a Feb. 17 unification bout in Saudi Arabia that will determine the division's first undisputed champion this century, Wilder and Joshua are in the kingdom this weekend and fighting simply to stay relevant.

Wilder, the WBC champion from 2015-20, was dethroned by Fury in February 2020 and has fought only twice since. What kind of shape will the 38-year-old American be in when he takes on Joseph Parker, the WBO champion from 2016-18?

After that comes the main event on what has been labeled the "Day of Reckoning" as Joshua, the former WBA, IBF and WBO titleholder, fights Otto Wallin, a New York-based Swedish journeyman. Joshua



In this March 3, 2018, file photo, Deontay Wilder, left, fights Luis Ortiz during the third round of the WBC heavyweight championship bout in New York.

has underwhelming wins over Jermaine Franklin and Robert Helenius on his record since back-to-back defeats to Usyk that left his career at a crossroads. Whether Wilder and Joshua have the belief after their damaging losses to become heavyweight champion again is open to ques-

tion. They are most likely to fight each other next provided they both win in Jeddah and the winner of what would be a big-money bout would, in theory, be in position to challenge for a world title. "It's the closest that it's ever been in history," Wilder said

this week of a potential meeting with Joshua that he regards as "the biggest fight in the world." Maybe five or six years ago, but surely not anymore. Not with Wilder having fought only Helenius since completing that trilogy against Fury in October 2021.

Associated Press

And not with Joshua appearing vulnerable and fragile after three losses in a five-fight span from 2019-22, crushing an aura he had built.

"I think he's lost his confidence and momentum," Wallin said of Joshua ahead of their fight, echoing the thoughts of many in boxing. "You can see the decline ... Joshua looks unsure of himself."

Joshua, a 34-year-old Brit who has been world champion twice after winning gold at the 2012 Olympics, has twice changed trainers to fuel his career rebuild and has been working with another Ben Davison, who was once in Fury's corner for the Wallin fight. A long-time media darling, Joshua has been more tight-lipped since arriving in Saudi Arabia and seems to be all business this time.

"I know where I'm going in my life," Joshua said, "but I've got to say, this is a checkpoint. And if I don't get past this, there is no future so I'm fully locked in to Otto Wallin and doing the job." □

## Report: Footballs in New England were deflated. But don't blame the Patriots this time

By **JIMMY GOLEN**  
AP Sports Writer

The special teams footballs used in Sunday's game between Kansas City and New England were reportedly underinflated not by the Patriots, this time an ironic throwback to the Deflategate scandal that captivated the football world for parts of three seasons and led to penalties against the team and quarterback Tom Brady.

MassLive.com reported on Thursday that the Patriots complained to the officials during the first half of the Chiefs' 27-17 victory that the balls used by the punters and kickers which are specially marked, and referred to as "K-balls" were

too soft. They were tested at halftime and found to be inflated to 11 psi, the website reported, instead of the league-mandated range of 12.5-13.5 psi.



New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick, center, turns away after shaking hands with Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes (15) following an NFL football game, Sunday, Dec. 17, 2023, in Foxborough, Mass.

Associated Press

After the 2015 Deflategate fiasco, when the NFL ruled that the Patriots were intentionally using underinflated footballs, the league took control of the game balls away from the teams.

"We were aware of it in the first quarter," Patriots coach Bill Belichick said Friday. "You have to talk to the league what happened on that, because we don't have anything to do with that part of it. They control all that."

An NFL spokesman did not respond to an email from The Associated Press seeking comment. Patriots kickers were not available during Thursday's open locker room period. Chiefs coach Andy Reid said on Thursday

that he hadn't heard of any issues but told reporters, "I'm not worried about all that."

The website reported and Belichick confirmed that the Patriots sensed something was wrong when Kansas City's Harrison Butker, who has put 87% of his kickoffs this season into the end zone for touchbacks, sent his game-opening kick only to the 3 yard-line. During the first half, both teams' kickers missed field goals, including a 39-yard attempt that was Butker's first miss of the season.

"I think you could see that by the kicks," Belichick said. "Butker had a perfect season going." □



## Gymnastics star Simone Biles named AP Female Athlete of the Year a third time after dazzling return

By WILL GRAVES  
AP National Writer

There were jitters, of course. Considering all that happened, how could there not be?

When Simone Biles walked onto the floor at a suburban Chicago arena in late July for her first gymnastics competition in two years, she knew plenty of people were wondering how it was going to go.

"I thought that too, don't worry," Biles said with a laugh.

By the end of one rotation, the most decorated gymnast of all time realized she was back in her safe space. By the end of August, she was a national champion. Again. By October, she was a world champion. Again. And by December, she was The Associated Press' Female Athlete of the Year. Yes, again.

Her triumphant return that included her record eighth U.S. national championship and a sixth world all-around gold made Biles the sixth woman to claim the AP honor for a third time. The 26-year-old seven-time Olympic medalist was followed by Iowa basketball star Caitlin Clark and Ballon d'Or winner Aitana Bonmati of the World Cup champion Spanish soccer team in voting by a panel of sports media professionals.

And to think, she wasn't really sure what awaited her on that summer night in front of a packed arena that supported her at every turn, a response she says she didn't anticipate.

Hard to blame her.

The last time Biles had saluted the judges, she was earning a bronze medal on the balance beam at the end of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the end of a tumultuous two weeks where her decision to pull out of multiple finals due to "the twisties" (think mid-air vertigo) dragged the sometimes uncomfortable conversation about athletes and their mental health into the white-hot spotlight



United States' Simone Biles shows her gold medal after the women's all-around final at the Artistic Gymnastics World Championships in Antwerp, Belgium, Friday, Oct. 6, 2023.

Associated Press

only the Games provide. Though she drew near-universal acclaim for her courage to put her safety first, a quick check of her mentions on social media showed not everyone agreed.

She took a two-year hiatus in the aftermath, going into what she called a "protective shell." She dove deeper into therapy while eyeing a return on her terms. Still, that didn't stop self-doubt from creeping in. Only this time, instead of letting the anxiety gnaw at her confidence, she accepted its presence, took a deep breath, and put on the kind of show that is hers and hers alone.

"I did a lot better than I thought I would do," Biles said.

Same as it ever was.

Biles previously won the AP honor in 2016 and 2019, times in her life she now barely recognizes.

She was still a teenager following her star-making performance at the Rio de Ja-

neiro Olympics. Still living at home with her parents. Her world still revolved around the spaceship of a gym her family built in the Houston suburbs.

Thinking about it, she can't help but shake her head a little bit. Biles remembers thinking she only had time to practice and if she was lucky get her nails done.

It's not that way anymore. She's made it a point to make sure that the sport she's redefined no longer defines her.

Biles married Green Bay Packers safety Jonathan Owens in the spring. Her time is split between getting to Packers games when her schedule allows, working with her corporate partners and poring over the details of the house she and her husband are building.

Part of her evolution is organic. Part of it is intentional. For too long, she let herself get too caught up in the outcome of every turn, every flip, every twist, ev-

ery practice in a discipline where perfection is literally unattainable.

"Whenever I was 19, it was the end of the world if I had bad days," she said. "Now I'm like, 'It's OK, it's just gymnastics and I'll come back tomorrow and we'll get it started again.'"

Biles isn't kidding when she says she's trying to take more of a "one day at a time" approach, not easy for someone who admits she has a habit of "best case/worst case-ing" every little thing. She didn't really get serious about returning until late spring when coach Cecile Landi suggested over margaritas that maybe it was time to give the world a peek at what Biles had been working on.

Her response was somewhere along the lines of "sure, OK" even though there was a part of her that felt she might not ever be ready.

"I didn't know what I was expecting," said Biles, who credited the people she

has surrounded herself with for believing in her when she was still grappling with her belief in herself. "People were like, 'No, we've seen you in training, this is what was supposed to happen.'"

And what was supposed to happen quickly became what has almost always happened since Biles began taking the norms of her sport and bending them to her will.

It wasn't just that she won but how she did it. Her intricate and gravity-defying tumbling has become more precise. A full decade into her elite career, her routines for all four events are still packed with remarkable difficulty.

Nowhere is that difficulty more apparent than on vault, where she became the first woman to perform a Yurchenko double-pike in international competition. The move a breathtaking combination of power and more than a little guts is now the fifth element to carry her name in the sport's code of points.

She doesn't have to do it to win. She does it anyway, because, as she put it a few years ago, she can.

Barring injury or the unforeseen, a third trip to the Olympics awaits next summer. She knows this. She'd just prefer not to talk about it. She only begrudgingly uses the words "Paris" or "Olympics" in interviews, a very conscious choice.

It's telling of where Biles is in her life that she recently shared an Instagram story in which followers were asked to post their best moment of 2023. The picture she chose wasn't taken from a routine or a medal podium but she and Owens dancing at their wedding reception, the picture of a life finding its balance. "At the end of the day I did worlds and all that stuff, but I did get married, I got to support him," she said. "It's just like, it's kind of nice that gymnastics isn't the main revolving piece." □



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